



24 January 2010

State, Defense Officials Brief on Efforts in Haiti

Officials provide update on relief, recovery actions

Teleconference Briefing on Relief Efforts in Haiti

Gordon Duguid

Spokesman

Col. Buck Elton, Air Operations Director

Via Teleconference from Haiti

January 21, 2010

Mr. Duguid: -- that Rear Admiral Samuel Paris would be here. The Admiral is unable to make it today and the Admiral will be the guest in our 2:00 p.m. call tomorrow. He does send his apologies.

Colonel Elton is here to discuss the ongoing story of operations at the Toussaint Louverture International Airport here in Port-au-Prince, as well as other air operations. I will let the Colonel say a few words at the start, and then I will call on you to offer your questions. Please when you do so, identify yourself and your organization and please limit your questions to one and have no follow-up question so we can get as many different questions in as we can.

Colonel Buck Elton, Air Operations Director: Hello everyone, my name is Colonel Bob Elton. I'm the Commander of the Joint Special Operations here in Haiti.

I was tasked with the mission on Wednesday to come down and provide [inaudible] authorities at the Port-au-Prince airfield and provide air traffic control services and general airfield support to the government of Haiti following the earthquake.

We launched within seven hours of notice and arrived to establish air traffic control in the infield grass of the airfield. Within 28 minutes after landing we linked up with the Haitian authorities and our combat control team used their Victor radios to establish communication with the arriving aircraft.

We developed a ground plan and we made an offload plan to assist the Haitian material handling equipment personnel in offloading all the supplies that started coming in on Wednesday.

We are operating out of an airfield that does not have electricity, phones or computers or anything other than what we brought in with us when we arrived that first day. I want to emphasize the point that we are still operating that way. We have combat controllers who work 12 hours shifts in the sun and the grass, working radios and liaising with the Haitian authorities in approach control and in our operation center liaises with the Haitian Flight Operations Coordination Center at Tindal Air Force Base in Florida and the Federal Aviation Administration, to sequence in a very large amount of aircraft into a very small field. I'd like to emphasize again, that this airfield is 10,000 feet long. It has

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one taxiway in the middle of the airfield. It's a single in/single out operation. You cannot take off and land aircraft at the same time. It's one and one.

We have a ramp that is very small and it will only hold up to 12 aircraft of varying sizes. We can only handle one wide-body aircraft at a time. We're limited primarily by our civilian material handling equipment that offloads the cargo. It takes up to five hours to offload a 747 or an AirBus 330 because we don't have enough [equipment] to offload it.

Approximately three medium sized aircraft, 737 type, and we have again, limited equipment to offload it. C-17 aircraft, although they're a large category, their wing span is not quite as wide as some of the wide bodies, and they are specifically designed for rapid offload of cargo which we can use military equipment for.

So the prioritization of the, again, the amounts of global aid that's being offered up to assist the Haitian government recover from this disaster has to be sequenced in through an airport much like it is at a civilian international airport. There are only so many gates and there are only so many ways to get people in and out. In a country that's been devastated with an earthquake and is limited on fuel, electricity, vehicles and people to get to work, this has been quite a challenge.

The international community and the Haitian authorities and the U.S. military have done a fantastic job sequencing in. I've got for you that will show that and break it down by type of aircraft.

Today we scheduled 149 aircraft and the breakdown on flight by flight out of that are 55 U.S. civilian; 51 U.S. government; and 43 international. Roughly breaking down to one-third U.S. military, and two-thirds international aid. Virtually all of the international aid is humanitarian relief, food, water, medical supplies, and [inaudible]. For the past couple of days, about 80 percent of the U.S. military cargo has been in through a C-17 and the 82nd Airborne who is deploying to assist the United Nations and the Haitian authorities in the distribution and security for the ground movement and the port movement of the supplies into the internationally coordinated distribution centers.

We think we are striking a reasonable balance between bringing in military hardware and international humanitarian aid, and we rely heavily on the cooperation between the United States Southern Command, the Haitian government, non-governmental organizations led by USAID for the United States, and Transportation Command out of the Haitian Flight Operations Coordination Center.

We're doing remarkable things on the ground, and because of the limitations of what we have on the ramp, we have aircraft break, we have material handling equipment to offload the cargo break, we have fuel problems, and then we have aircraft that are waiting to unload [inaudible]. When you have a schedule that allows for a certain amount ground time and that schedule is changed by longer ground time than we planned, you're going to have some overflow, some divert.

When we first started this operation we had between 40 and 50 divert a day because there was no coordination and flow control into this airfield and we simply couldn't handle it. We established flow control procedures, we are focusing our flow control out to the 10th of February, we are prioritizing every day which cargo should get in before which cargo, again based on inputs from the Haitian government and the international organization, and when we get unexpected delays, much like we get at international airports when weather or other events prevent aircraft from getting in, we have to divert them. Large aircraft are hard to work in because we only have so much space.

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Early on in the operation we had an Airbus 330 block half the ramp because they did not listen to [inaudible] instructions and they shut down and we could only use half the ramp. We have worked through those procedures with the pilots and with the companies that operate the airlines and we're a very efficient operation out there. I would like to point out that we have brought in many flights into the airfield and we have not had - it is uncontrolled airspace, no radar, [procedural control] primarily using radios while standing in the grass next to the runway, and we have had zero mishaps with over 1800, as of yesterday, 1800 fixed wing aircraft since we arrived on Wednesday, and 600 helicopters into an airfield, Port-au-Prince, which averaged 15 fixed wing and 20 helicopters a day.

I want to emphasize again, we are doing this without electricity, computers, and with fuel shortage and everything else. It is a remarkable operation that's going out there.

I'll stop talking and standby for your specific questions.

Mr. Duguid: Thank you very much, Colonel.

Question: Chuck Bennett, New York Post.

There are some reports that the seaport has been opened, but any of the supplies coming into the seaport are actually trucked to the airport to be stockpiled there. Can somebody explain what the logic is in moving the supplies from the seaport to the airport [inaudible]?

Colonel Elton: I'll tell you that it doesn't sound logical because it's not logical and it's not true. The only cargo at the airfield is cargo that we're flying in on the aircraft and that cargo is moved out on a rapid basis. The reason it looks like there's a lot of cargo on the airfield is because it's continuously resupplied with the arriving aircraft as it moves out.

We have a good system for distribution. It was difficult the first few days because we didn't have the trucks or the fuel or the roads open, and now we do. But no, we're not moving aid from the port to the airfield.

Question: That's what the BBC is reporting right now.

Question: Adam Levine, CNN.

I'm wondering if you can give a little detail about what you're taking outside of Port-au-Prince, now that you're able to move into places like [Chapmel] and Leogane with the Marines.

Colonel Elton: We have been moving the rotary wing aircraft primarily off the Carl Vincennes, but also with the Puerto Rican Army National Guard, UH-60 helicopters, SH-60 helicopters, and [inaudible] helicopters. So we have been resupplying {Chapmel}. The Canadian C-130s are landing there, and it's become somewhat of a distribution center of its own providing aid to the communities around [Chapmel]. We have also, through USAID and other international partners, the road is open from Santo Domingo and the road convoys have begun. Also there was a question earlier about the port. We will have Admiral Paris with us tomorrow, but the port is operating in a very limited capacity. There is still much work to be done there, but it is a third route for aid into the country and we're hoping that the operations there will pick up steam very soon.

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Question: Pat Weaver, German Press Agency.

I'd like to ask you about reports that some Haitians who were trying to leave by sea were being prevented from leaving by the U.S. Navy. Can you comment at all on that?

Colonel Elton: I can, Pat. I'm unaware that any Haitians have tried to leave by sea. What is correct is that the U.S. government and the Haitian government in partnership have been advising Haitians not to try to cross from Haiti to the United States in unsafe conditions.

The United States, the Department of Homeland Security has declared temporary protective status for Haitians, undocumented Haitians, who are in the United States at this time. That is for their safety. We don't want them to try and get home and add to the protection problems that are here, the distribution problems that are here on the ground.

Neither do we want Haitians to try and cross over to the United States in what they've traditionally gone in very very unsafe craft over very rough seas. They will get aid and assistance by staying here much quicker than they will if they try and cross in very dangerous conditions. That is our message. At this point I have no information that we have actually seen any Haitians attempt a sea crossing.

Question: Michael [inaudible], [inaudible] Direct.

[Inaudible] have been complaining for a couple of days that a lot of their [inaudible]. Can you comment on that? And tell me, you said 30 to 40 diverts a day. How many today?

Colonel Elton: There are some diverts that happen across the Atlantic and with the Federal Aviation Administration that we do not have visibility on. Some of the reports actually come from aircraft that try to get in outside of the scheduled flow control and are not allowed by the landing center to enter into the schedule because they were not authorized by being granted a flow control spot. So similar to landing at a busy international airport without a gate to go to, the flow control, the [inaudible] control [inaudible] go in without prior [inaudible].

[Inaudible] Doctors without Borders aircraft that could not get in during its scheduled flow control slot time because we had delays on the ground. It was a busy time at the airfield and we were overwhelmed with our ability to offload the aircraft in a timely manner. We asked the aircraft to divert to another airfield where they could get fuel and come back. We ended up putting them in, I think it was a 1500 Eastern Standard Time arrival, and we got them in at 2000 after they went and got gas, so they did get in that day.

There's no doubt in my mind that some countries and some international organizations divert and can't get in, but there's also no doubt in my mind that we are maximizing the available space on the ground, and that virtually every aircraft full of international aid is valuable and is a priority, and medical supplies are flowing into the airfield as well as international food and water and relief.

Question: Adam Levine, CNN.

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We're also continuing to hear reports about people taking orphans out of Haiti. We're hearing a report of some [babies] that are leaving to join up with families. Where do things stand? What is the policy right now in terms of letting orphans out of the country and allowing for adoption?

Colonel Elton: The policy right now is that the protection of the child is the most important thing that anyone can do. There have been orphans who were in the process of being adopted who have received visas and have gone to the United States to meet with their adopted parents. There have been other orphans whose applications were in the early stages of being worked but suitable parents, a suitable adoptive parent had been identified and had gone through all of the very rigorous vetting procedures that both U.S. and Haitian law demands. Those orphans received a waiver of the, if I can put it that way, remaining paperwork and have also been moved to the U.S. to meet with their adoptive parents.

If a child does not have a matched set of perspective parents, then we will not move that child. We are working on the ground with orphanages to make sure that they are safe, that they have the supplies that they need. But the safety of the child is paramount and national laws are also governing this process.

I guess the short answer to your question is the laws governing international adoptions have not changed. What has changed in this particular situation is that those children who have been matched with adoptive parents have been moved as quickly as they could to join those parents. They do not want in any circumstance to have people who would take advantage of the current conditions to get into this process, and therefore very strict vetting of adoptive parents will continue, and we will continue on the ground to work with the Haitian government, the orphanages and other charitable institutions to make sure that the children are as protected and as comfortable as they can be.

Question: Carlos Sprios, the Long Beach Post.

Colonel, do you have any information [inaudible], but any specific information about the rescue operation at the Hotel Montana? I know at one point it was kind of a focus because there were a lot of folks there, certainly a lot of Americans trapped there. Do you have any information about what's going on at that site and whether it's moved from a more rescue to a more recovery phase?

Colonel Elton: I do have some [inaudible] rescue assisting the Fairfax County rescue team, and they have been working on the Montana Hotel. I don't have the most up to date information on the status of the recovery at the Hotel Montana, but I do know that they have had rescue operations going over there, especially the first couple of days.

Mr. Duguid: I can address some of that. My information is as of the middle of the night. I haven't been to the site this morning so you'll have to forgive me for not having right up to the minute information.

Seven international search and rescue crews have been working the Hotel Montana for the past several days. There have been crews at the Hotel Montana since search and rescue began. They have rescued a number of people who were trapped there. Search and rescue does continue. The Haitian government has the authority on search and rescue operations. They decide when to call a halt to search and rescue operations. But in practice, search and rescue operations never end, because if there is someone in a building and we can identify sounds, noises, there is a suspicion or an inclination to think that there is a person alive and trapped in that building, search and rescue will be called back.

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The search and rescue teams that have been here have done an exceptional job. In a week they have rescued 122 people, I believe there was a rescue this morning. That's why my information is not up to date. It may be 123 at this point, but it was 122 as of the middle of the night. That rate, although placed against the destruction that has taken place here might not seem to be a success. Indeed it is. Each rescue takes about eight hours of work on a crew. They've been at it 24 hours a day. All the international crews, some 43 of them, are working in shifts, and all of the sites that have been identified by the DART teams and the other disaster relief teams that came in early, and they have not stopped.

So the USAID, the Disaster Assistance Relief Team, came in the very first day after the earthquake. The earthquake happened on a Tuesday evening. DART was in country on Wednesday identifying sites where there could be survivors under the rubble. The first team of which I believe came from Fairfax County, Virginia, was on the ground shortly after that. So rescue operations began as quickly as they humanly could, and they have continued until today, and we are still finding people under the rubble, and we will continue to look as long as we believe there is a chance someone is there.

Question: Margaret [inaudible], CBS News Hour.

I have two questions, and if you've covered this before, just say you have and I'll check the transcript later.

What is the state at the port? We hear that it is partly reopening.

And two, how many people have been buried? What percentage of those who died you believe have been buried.

Colonel Elton: Starting on your second question, this is one that [inaudible]. On your second question I would have to refer to the Haitian government which has the legal authority on the disposition of human remains. There have been some burials. I don't know the numbers of those.

The United States is assisting with the disposition of remains. We have what they call demort teams in country right now that are helping the government to take care of remains in a, first of all, a respectful way and in a sanitary way as well to try and stop the spread of any diseases.

On the port question. Yes, the port has some operations ongoing. To call it open I think is not quite accurate. Vessels can approach. French divers and U.S. Coast Guard personnel have been clearing areas around the south pier. We could see some aid deliveries there in the very near future, in a matter of days. But right now it is mostly very shallow craft that are getting in there. The port was very badly affected. It is, however, a very very efficient way to get supplies in so we're working as fast as we can in the hope that we'll have the port opening in the very near future.

Meanwhile, each day more vessels will be able to come into the port. We're certainly ferrying [patients] out to the USMS Comfort from portside facilities.

Question: Brian Murphy, ABC News.

You mentioned a rescue today, that was something I hadn't heard of before. Do you have any more details on that rescue?

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Colonel Elton: I was talking to one of my security forces that was out providing security to the French rescue team, and who were augmented by the Air Force Special Operations [inaudible] Rescue and [inaudible] a long period of time, more than eight hours rescuing a female Haitian who had been trapped for seven days without food or water and [inaudible]. The exact location, I'm sorry, I don't have that data. The [inaudible] were telling me about it yesterday. But it was an amazing rescue that required specialized equipment that our military carries and going through multiple layers of [inaudible] to get the victim and to bring her back up. But the details on that exact location [inaudible]. I don't have that.

Question: Palm Beach Post. I just wanted to ask a quick follow-up.

Regarding the Montana site, we heard it's being kind of – I'm sorry, we heard the military police are restricting access so we don't know. [Inaudible] resources to that site appear to be somewhat diminished now from yesterday. Do you have any information on whether, in other words, whether the focus is elsewhere because rescue doesn't seem to be -

Mr. Duguid: As I said earlier, I don't have up to date information from the middle of the night and I apologize. But what I do know is that yesterday we had, I know that some people have referred to it as an aftershock. It was 6.1 on the Richter scale, and I compare that to the earthquake. That has made some sites unsafe. The last thing anyone wants is to lose some of the search and rescue people and put them in a dangerous position. You create problems all around. The site itself, the Hotel Montana, has been searched very very thoroughly. My information coming in was that there were still crews there. If the police are now restricting access, I won't speculate on what is happening. I do know that there were areas of the Montana that because of yesterday's earth quake did become unsafe and we don't want private individuals trying to go onto that site to undertake individual rescue efforts. That would not be helpful.

Question: [Inaudible].

Colonel, was that you that answered or was that Gordon Duguid with the State Department?

Mr. Duguid: We kind of split the question. I gave the longest answer, if that helps.

We've got very bad lines here. It's good if we can get one line out every day, but many of the communications are very restricted.

Question: So Gordon, you were the one who --

Question: Chuck [inaudible] from the Post.

The Haitian government announced today that they plan to start constructing housing in the outskirts of Port-au-Prince for 400,000 displaced persons. Is the U.S. government involved in this effort? And if not, do you have any more information about what the Haitian government's plans are?

Colonel Elton: I don't have the information [inaudible] reconstruction efforts are ongoing. They of course are rudimentary at the moment.

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The phases of any rescue operation aren't clearcut. While we still have search and rescue going on, which is what everyone considers the initial phase. We also have care of the injured and feeding and housing of those who are homeless.

So the phases are ongoing. We have seen, and are looking at reconstruction needs and they are liaising with the Haitian government. This particular initiative, I don't have the information but the U.S. government in general is working very very closely with the Haitian government along with the construction effort, the beginning planning part of the reconstruction.

I just want to add that my team has also been coordinating with the airdrop relief of supplies to areas outside of Port-au-Prince where we can insert humanitarian aid, food and water, to areas that are difficult to reach via ground. WE conducted our second airdrop with a C-17 from the United States that delivered 40 containers delivery systems comprised of water and ration meals with a total weight of 69,600 pounds. This is 14,000 individual meals. It's 14,000 quarters of water delivered via parachute.

Today we deliver it near Mara Valley to the Nepalese United Nations battalion who secured the drop zone and assisted with the delivery of the food to the local population.

Several days ago we did an airdrop to a point east of the town where we dropped it and it was self distributed to the people in the local area with some liaisons. [Inaudible] assisted.

Question: It was the second airdrop or the third?

Colonel Elton: They've done two airdrops of C-17, one this morning at 0800 Eastern Standard time, the first one on the 18th. It's difficult doing airdrops for resupply because it's difficult to secure and distribute it in an orderly manner. What we've found so far is that the Haitian people are quite generous people, helping with each other. We interviewed some English-speaking Haitian people who were on the ground as part of the recovery, and we've been working closely with the Haitian government. And Carl [inaudible] each post.

Colonel Elton: -- suitable way to provide aid to regions that are are difficult to get to. I hope that's a very long time. So we're doing everything we can, moving aid via rotary winged aircraft and via fixed wing airdrop to places that need it the most. Yesterday our Navy and Army rotary wing aircraft delivered almost 15,000 rations and almost 30,000 bottles of water to locations identified by both the Haitian government and by the international aid organizations as places that needed aid.

As we continue to pull forces in and have more capability to move the aid that's coming in via the airport and seaport, we are continuing to reach out and to assist more Haitians.

Mr. Duguid: Thank you very much, Colonel. That completes our press availability today, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you. We were on the record. And it was United States Air Force Colonel Elton who is the commander, Joint Special Operations Air Component in Haiti. And Gordon Duguid, Deputy Spokesman of the State Department, currently the spokesman for the U.S. Joint Information Center Haiti.

We'll have Admiral Samuel Paris tomorrow at 2:00 o'clock who will talk to you better about the port operations and the maritime operations.

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